

Our Core Values: Service – Integrity – Teamwork – Excellence – Stewardship

Part of the Values at Work Series

Continuous and Crucial Campus Support During COVID-19

Facilities Services stepped up to provide support to The University of Texas at Austin (UT) during the COVID-19 pandemic in multiple, significant ways. This story focuses on a snapshot in time in the fight against the spread of the virus. It shares our never-wavering call to duty to address this unprecedented crisis on campus from the spring 2020 closure of the university, through fall 2020 semester preparations, and up to the spring 2021 on-campus vaccination efforts.

From the beginning, with uncertainty at the forefront, our team members were on campus to keep our university safe and operational as we joined the war being waged against COVID-19. While many in the nation turned to virtual conferencing with Zoom or Microsoft Teams to stay connected and carry out their educational or work-related activities, a significant part of the work in facilities management, despite the risks involved, had to be done on site and in person. Our team members followed all health and safety protocols while supporting the campus because Facilities Services (FS) believes that integrity means doing what is best for the UT community, even when no one is watching.

This [Flickr photo album](#) shows the story of our continuous and crucial campus support during the pandemic, exemplifying our values of Service, Integrity, Teamwork, Excellence, and Stewardship.

Early-stage prevention work

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the Coronavirus outbreak a pandemic in early March 2020. Not long after the WHO announcement, university officials decided to close the campus for the health and safety of the UT community.

As the community remained in what many referred to as “lockdown,” only essential staff were permitted on the UT campus. The campus quickly went from a bustling, active university environment to a subdued, low-density environment in all campus buildings. This change in campus activity level required FS to adjust their operations schedule, including maintenance repairs, building cleaning, trash and recycling pickup, landscape maintenance, and work assignments.

Unoccupied campus buildings were of immediate concern. These buildings had the potential to lead to an unhealthy condition should the water in the pipes remain stagnant. The solution to avoid the possibility of this occurring was provided through preventive actions by our team members.

Facilities Operations and Maintenance (FOM) technicians and UT's Environmental Health and Safety team conducted extensive water testing needed across campus buildings. They also teamed up with Custodial Services to flush the water systems, such as in bathroom sinks and drinking fountains. These actions underline the value we place in stewardship and pride of "ownership" in the facilities we maintain on behalf of the university's mission.

Teams from our Landscape and Integrated Building Services (LIBS) division also exemplified our values as they stepped up to provide essential campus services during the early-stage prevention work efforts, as described below.

Although occupancy levels on campus were very low, facilities operations and critical research still needed to continue, which meant that solid waste was still being generated and needed to be picked up in a timely manner. Our Solid Waste and Recycling team kept trash dumpsters emptied, maintaining sanitation protocols and eliminating any potential rodent issues.

Landscape Services didn't miss a beat as they contributed to this stage of the FS efforts with masks on, mowers and trimmers in hand, chainsaws at the ready, and irrigation supplies in tow. They took to their tasks, driving solo for social distancing in their university carts and trucks. Even though campus felt like a ghost town, this team made certain that it didn't look like one.

Construction projects still moved forward, and Landscape Services made sure to attend these meetings to provide their expertise for projects where trees and plants are impacted, such as planning for landscape renovations during the construction process. They also performed construction site inspections to verify that contractors were following university landscape standards. Many of these inspections are related to tree health and protection.

They were also vigilant with managing pest control by maintaining their preventative maintenance schedule to ensure pests did not have the opportunity to adapt to empty facilities or unkept grounds.

Lock and Key Services provided necessary key assistance as confirmed cases increased on campus and access to the infected rooms was necessary in order for disinfecting procedures to take place. This team also assisted with construction project requirements related to locks and keys.

Prepping the campus for the fall of 2020: a semester like no other

University operations officials developed task forces and "Tiger Teams" who were deployed in numerous ways to prevent the spread of the virus throughout the campus, including posting signage to provide guidance, zip-tying chairs to avoid close contact in classrooms, establishing warehouse and distribution systems of the needed personal protective equipment (PPE) such as masks, and many other important tasks. Due to the unique health and safety precautions arising from the pandemic, FS teams were heavily involved in these activities, putting our values of service and teamwork at the forefront of this critical battle against the virus.

Strategic thinking by our leadership led to the reassignment of certain FS positions with useful skill sets to other areas in need at that time rather than to let them go or lay them off. For example, because of social distancing concerns, the university required all events to be cancelled. Our Event and Moving Services (EMS) team was temporarily reassigned to support Custodial Services or to relocate or rearrange furniture in spaces to allow for social distancing, among other tasks.

EMS and Custodial Services were also called upon to assemble thousands of hand sanitizer stations and distribute them to buildings across the Main Campus and the J. J. Pickle Research Campus (PRC). The Custodial Services teams placed the sanitizer stations in their specific spots in buildings, then filled, (and continued to refill) the sanitizer into each of the units throughout campus.

An innovative FOM team in PRC maintenance zone developed a quick and responsive solution to protect the people stationed at an information desk. They built a safety barrier around the information center at the Bureau of Economic Geology building before using plexiglass became the norm.

Collaboration and coordination: key components

One of the primary sources for coordinating our work on behalf of the university is the Facilities Service Center (FSC), the Grand Central Station of facilities work control at UT Austin. Like a cadre of air traffic controllers, this team sprang into action, and remained on alert throughout the pandemic. The value of service through collaboration kept this dedicated group at the top of their game—even as new and different challenges surfaced.

The FSC partnered closely with the Tiger Teams for the fall 2020 building reopening efforts that began that summer. The experience helped in future collaborations and laid the groundwork for when the FSC was called upon to develop collaborative reports and dashboards that kept senior leadership informed of the progress toward fall 2021 reopening efforts.

One of the strengths of the FSC is their relationship with building managers, who represent the occupants when it comes to facilities-related matters. Drawing on the FSC's knowledge of building manager representation for the university's buildings, they were able to determine that over 60 buildings did not have a building manager to coordinate the fall 2020 reopening requirements with. To address the issue, this team led a project to identify someone who could assume this responsibility for each of those buildings.

Adapting to change

Stephen Hawking once said, "Intelligence is the ability to adapt to change." FS believes in working smart. Knowing how to adapt building environments to the situation or context is a perfect example of how we apply our knowledge and experience to new situations to better serve the building occupants.

FOM engineers and building automation systems analysts worked with technicians who tested HVAC systems and increased outdoor airflow into the buildings in response to the pandemic. They also ensured that we were following national public health guidance on ventilation systems and air circulation. Further, they continue to stay abreast of the evolving information about COVID-19 as it relates to airborne transmission and indoor air filtration systems in order to adjust our safety protocols as necessary.

Custodial Services implemented increased high-use touch-point disinfection for doorknobs, push plates, handles, and elevator buttons, plus disinfecting water fountains and classroom desks, chair arms, and console surfaces, keyboards and touch panels at the front of classrooms. Disinfectant misting machines were also incorporated into classroom and public area disinfection to get broad coverage more efficiently.

COVID-19 Vaccine hub for Austin

Another major stage at the university in the war against the spread of the virus was the establishment of a large-scale vaccination clinic at Gregory Gym (GRE) to serve both the UT and greater Austin community. The FSC collaborated with UT's Office of Emergency Preparedness and Office of Campus Safety to develop the work order for all the facilities-based work associated with setting up the clinic.

The EMS team played an important role in setting up (and eventually taking down) the furnishings required to operate this crucial "hub," such as tables, chairs, and trash cans for the clinic.

Custodial Services teams provided daily cleaning and disinfecting for the clinic, a critical component of keeping the vaccination operations healthy and safe for everyone.

Mobility requirements for those who needed assistance from the parking garage to the vaccination site at Gregory Gym were provided by volunteers driving in carts back and forth. FS volunteers stepped up and signed up for shifts to provide these services.

The momentum generated from these first vaccination operations will have long-lasting effects for the university and surrounding community.

Leading for our Longhorn community

Speaking of momentum, there are times when someone comes forward to encourage others to take action—especially an action that benefits the health and safety of so many others. Getting the COVID-19 vaccination is one of those times. That's why members of the Facilities Services team, including the director and senior leadership team, shared getting their vaccine using multiple channels, such as on internal websites, emails, social media, and when possible, in meetings (mostly virtual) or in person.

Always aiming for Excellence

The COVID-19 pandemic challenges all of us in ways the world never expected. For the university, new operational procedures had to be developed and followed for the health and safety of everyone on campus. We all had a stake in the need to “Protect Texas Together,” the campus-wide call to adhere to the university’s guidance to prevent the spread of the virus.

Overcoming challenges for the benefit of others is one of the ways we seek excellence in everything we do “Being challenged in life is inevitable, being defeated is optional,” said Roger Crawford, award-winning Hall of Fame athlete (despite four impaired limbs) and keynote speaker. We agree with Crawford. We don’t let obstacles get the best of us.

View our [Flickr photo album](#) to see how we showed our commitment to the university in addressing the pandemic’s impact on our campus.

For media inquiries, contact Veronica Trevino at veronica.trevino@austin.utexas.edu or by cell phone at 830-534-3263.